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¶1. Summary. Despite generally low economic status, land tenure issues, and a renewed refugee inflow from Laos, the Hmong hill people today are considered among the more successful hill tribe groups in Thailand. Best known for fighting beside US forces in Laos from the 1960s to 1975 while a significant number of others joined the Communist Party of Thailand insurgency, this group has benefited both from agricultural development projects and from the support of a large Hmong population in the US. At the same time, however, some Thai-Hmong are suspected of involvement in cross-border activities in Laos, and the ethnic group itself remains on top of the official drug trafficking watch list. Our Thai-Hmong contacts disavow any connection with the alleged plot that led to the "Tarnished Eagle" June 4 arrests in the US (ref a). End summary

¶2. The Hmong people's history and continued connections with the US and Laos give them a significance beyond their relatively small numbers in Thailand -- estimated at just under 200,000. Hmong anthropologist and Chiang Mai University professor Dr. Prasit Leepreecha (Hmong name Tsav Txhiaj Lis) compared the Hmong situation in northern Thailand during the 1960s to the circumstances in Thailand's south today, where government suspicion of an ethnic group fuels the opposition. (Dr. Prasit stopped short of suggesting that today's improved position of the Hmong offers a solution for the south. While the Thai Hmong who joined the Communist insurgency had little interest in the ideology of the party and therefore easily accepted the government's amnesty in the early 1980s, the southern insurgency, he believes, has deeper roots.)

--- Cashing in on Fruits and Flowers ---

¶3. A Hmong leader eager to showcase his community's adaptation to changing social, economic and environmental conditions in northern Thailand provided Consulate staff with a tableau of the new livelihood that has replaced the opium economy of Golden Triangle infamy. Por Luang Koed, whose village is located in Chiang Mai's Doi Inthanon National Park, invited the Consul General and others to visit in late April - timed for ripe peaches. With continued political debate over forest management and the right of forest dwellers to remain in protected areas, Por Luang wanted to show how he and his Hmong neighbors protect the environment and cooperate with the Royal Project Foundation to produce and develop new cash crops in fruits and cut flowers.

¶4. Recent Hmong history has been more linked to guns and drugs than peaches and roses. As a result of their role in US engagement in Laos from the early 1960s to 1975, nearly 200,000 fled to Thailand as refugees. Approximately 90 percent of the refugees were eventually resettled in the US, where an estimated 200,000 now live. Several million more live in the greater

Mekong region, primarily in southern China, with 160,000-180,000 in Thailand. Within this community are many different groups, including Hmong who fought for the U.S. in Laos and crossed to Thailand, Hmong in Laos who did not side with the U.S., Hmong who have long lived in Thailand and joined the communist insurgency against the RTG, and Hmong who have long lived in Thailand but did not join the insurgency. During the past few years, some 8,000 Lao-Hmong have entered Thailand's Petchaboon province, re-opening a refugee chapter that had been considered over by 2004-2005 as resettlement came to an end at the Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp.

¶ 15. Both Por Luang Koed and Dr. Prasit dismissed the current Petchaboon group as economic migrants, claiming that many had left their homes in Laos after being told by relatives in the US that they would be resettled there (ref b). Dr. Prasit agreed that some Hmong in Thailand and the US are making money off encouraging the flow into Thailand, but insisted that the long-settled Thai-Hmong here are not involved.

--- Hmong Come Calling ---

¶ 16. Thanks to the large Hmong population in the US and in the northern Thai region, Consulate Chiang Mai handles a sizeable number of Hmong visa applicants. Organizations in the US such as the Lao Family Community in California, Wisconsin and Minnesota, Hmong Wisconsin Radio, United Hmong International, and the Hmong International New Year visit the Consulate and fax support for visa applicants. One of the individuals arrested in June, Youa True Vang, also known as Joseph Youa Vang, has been listed as a sponsor or trip coordinator by some of our visa applicants.

¶ 17. The Consulate is also in touch with other US-based organizations about AmCit concerns, human rights, and similar non-visa issues. These include the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University, Lao Human Rights Council, Lao Veterans of America, Hmong National Development, and Hmong Wisconsin Radio.

In addition, we have briefed US study abroad groups that include Hmong students, including St. Olaf College and

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University of Wisconsin Eau Claire.

¶ 18. The US-based Hmong groups pursue contacts with government officials as well. Chiang Rai Gov. Amorapun Nimanandh consulted earlier this year with the CG about a letter of invitation he had received to the Hmong New Year in Fresno, California; after the arrest of Gen. Vang Pao in June, Gov. Amorapun notified the Consulate that he had cancelled a planned trip to a Hmong celebration in Minnesota.

--- Communism to Crops ---

¶ 19. Hmong Thailand Network chair Por Luang Koed, who showed off his peach crop and peaceful village to Consulate staff last April, is recognized by staff of the Royal Project and the Office of Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) for his contribution to various RTG counter-narcotics-related programs. A former Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) mid-level commander in the 1970-1980s insurgency who mobilized popular support from Hmong communities in the Chiang Rai-Phayao-Nan area, Por Luang Koed joined other insurgents in accepting amnesty from the Thai government in the early 1980s.

¶ 10. With different government agencies pursuing competing interests in areas declared "natural habitat," Por Luang's community has plenty of motivation to demonstrate its wise land management and good citizenship. A much-debated Community Forest bill that would protect indigenous forest dwellers from being resettled elsewhere has made little progress since the coup. Although agricultural burning by hill tribes was cited, accurately or not, as one of the causes of the heavy haze that settled over northern Thailand in March, Por Luang said his village no longer practices traditional slash-and-burn farming.

--- Role of the Royal Projects ---

¶11. Por Luang ties improvements in the Hmong community to the Royal Project Foundation, set up by the King over three decades ago to encourage hill people to switch from opium poppies to new cash crops. The Doi Inthanon Royal Project near Por Luang's village concentrates on temperate fruits and cut flowers, including strawberries, plums, peaches, roses, chrysanthemums, dahlias and fuchsia. Plant tissues are purchased from commercial dealers in places such as the Netherlands and Hawaii; the Royal Project cultivates the tissue and sells it to hilltribe farmers who willing to try new crops. Farmers are encouraged to use ecologically friendly farming methods and as few pesticides as possible; Por Luang insisted that his peaches and plums are chemical free.

¶12. The Royal Project Foundation runs research stations and 36 development centers which cover 444 villages comprising 24,043 households with a total population of approximately 100,000 people. Por Luang sells his crops to the Royal Project, which in turns cools, packs, and markets the produce in Bangkok and Chiang Mai under the Doi Kham brand name. The products have a niche market in Thailand; a Royal Project official said little is exported but that success can be measured by a reduction of imports.

¶13. Many problems remain, including issues of land tenure in protected areas, cultural identity and continued identification with the drug trade. A senior ONCB official in Chiang Mai portrayed the Hmong as interested only in wealth, at the price of social values; he noted that Hmong remain on the top of ONCB's watch list of hill tribe groups involved in drug trafficking. A contact from the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) reported that counterparts from ONCB, the Police Narcotics Suppression Bureau (NSB) and Provincial Police Region 5 have seen a recent upward trend in methamphetamine "yaba" and "ice" cases involving Hmong.

---- Making it in Thai Society ---

¶14. Over all, however, living conditions and acceptance in Thai society are much improved from earlier decades. The Hmong are considered more willing than some other hill groups to integrate with the local majority when given the chance - Por Luang's granddaughter speaks Hmong at home but attends a Thai school in the district town of Chom Thong. Dr Chupinit Ketmanee, chair of the Inter-Mountain Peoples' Education and Culture Thailand (IMPECT) Association, ranked the Hmong ahead of other tribal groups in many respects, especially in accessing education and in economic and social-legal status. Over 90% are now registered as Thai citizens, he claimed, a percentage backed up by a recent UNESCO survey of hill tribe citizenship that looked at the influence of legal status and ethnicity on access to education, health care and other social services in border areas.

¶15. Comment: While most stories about the Hmong still tend to focus on refugees, drugs, or border clashes, Consulate Chiang Mai sees a somewhat more positive if still mixed picture. After over 30 years of efforts by numerous organizations to introduce new crops to replace poppy cultivation, the Royal Project has been able to provide a degree of land security and income from

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crops previously unknown in the region. In the meantime Hmong resettled to the US over the past three decades have started to explore returning as retirees and to send their children as exchange students. For those who live in Thailand, the high percentage of citizenship both indicates and contributes to the community's stability. Although this rosy view is clouded by Lao border issues and continued connections with the drug trade, it indicates a marked improvement over negative images from earlier decades.

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